

## PASTORAL LETTER ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SUNDAY MASS

To the Parishioners of  
St. Michael's & St. Joseph's Parishes  
in Fall River, MA



# *“Dies Domini”* Keeping The Lord's Day Holy

*“This is the day which the Lord has made:  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.” (Ps 118:24)*

Beginning on the feast of Corpus Christi, the solemnity of the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Church begins an effort to bring about a Eucharistic Revival to foster a deeper awareness of the True Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. The goal is to focus on the importance of the Sunday Mass and to invite back those who have fallen out of the practice of attending Mass each Sunday. I would like to begin this renewal in our parishes by offering my own reflection and an invitation to all parishioners to join me reclaiming the Lord's Day.

When I was assigned to St. Patrick's Parish in Falmouth, we were blessed to have many summer visitors. The number of people that flock to Cape Cod during the summer months made it necessary for so many of the parishes to add extra Masses to accommodate those on vacation. At St. Patrick's we had the Chapel of St. Thomas that is open from Memorial Day to Columbus Day, which allowed us to have an additional four weekend Masses. I personally thought it was a great witness of faith that so many people see the necessity of attending Sunday, even when on vacation. However, we shouldn't get into the frame of mind of thinking that this is something extraordinary. Our attendance and participation at Sunday Mass is something that is central and essential for all Catholics. In one sense, it is the bare minimum. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that *“the Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice; for this reason, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation”* which includes every Sunday of the year (*Catechism*, 2181).

It is, however, no huge revelation that in recent years the number of people keeping the Lord's Day holy is in a steady decline. Many people may fondly remember the days when Sunday was a day for God and family, when stores were not open, when there were no youth sporting events interfering with morning Mass as a family. It is clear that Sunday has become just another day of the week. In response to this ever-increasing predicament, our late Holy Father, Pope Saint John Paul II wrote the Apostolic Letter, *Dies Domini*, on the importance of keeping the Lord's Day holy. It is clear that the Pope was keenly aware that the crisis of Sunday observance reflects the crisis within the Catholic Church and of Christianity in general. The "strikingly low" attendance to the Sunday liturgy reflects in the Pope's view the fact that "motivation of faith is weak" and "seems to be diminishing" (*Dies Domini*, 5). John Paul II reminded us of the ever-present sacredness of Sunday by tracing through Sacred Scripture the significance and the relevance of Sunday worship. From the natural creation of the world at the beginning of time to the *re*-creation of the supernatural order at the moment of the Resurrection, the Lord's Day is meant to be observed and kept holy. We observe the Lord's day, to honor Him, to thank Him and to remind ourselves that we only exist and have anything because of His benevolence. The natural question to ask is why have we lost a sense reverence for the Lord's command to keep this day sacred, as we find in the third commandment (Exodus 20:8-11). Where did we go wrong? When did we lose the sense of fulfilling our Christian obligation? Why is Sunday no longer important or sacred?

*"If angels could be  
jealous of men,  
they would be so  
for one reason:  
Holy Communion."*

St. Maximilian Kolbe



We can spend a lot of time trying to answer that particular question and trying to find the moment or series of events that led us to this point. What is most important, however, is that we reclaim the sanctity and importance of Sunday as both a day of rest and a day of worship. Pope John Paul II explained that *"even if in the earliest times it was not judged necessary to be prescriptive, the Church has not ceased to confirm this obligation of conscience, which rises from the inner need felt so strongly by the Christians of the first centuries. It was only later, faced with the half-heartedness or negligence of some, that the Church had to make explicit the duty to attend Sunday Mass."* (*Dies Domini*, 47).

After describing many challenging situations around the world, Pope John Paul II also highlighted the fact that there are “*many who wish to live in accord with the demands of their faith that are being faced with surroundings which are sometimes indifferent and unresponsive to the Gospel message.*” He goes on to say that, “*if believers are not to be overwhelmed, they must be able to count on the support of the Christian community. This is why they must be convinced that it is crucially important for the life of faith that they should come together with others on Sundays to celebrate the Passover of the Lord in the sacrament of the New Covenant (Dies Domini, 48).* It is simply so sad when so many Christians have forgotten about or neglected the importance of Sunday worship. This is the most basic part of our Christian identity and yet it has become one of the easiest things to dismiss. But we can not just shake our heads and agree that this is disappointing. Our Lord calls each of us to be His witnesses by inviting others back to a regular practice of the faith, especially in the communal observance of Sunday Mass.

*“Today more than ever, the Church is unwilling to settle for minimalism and mediocrity at the level of faith. She wants to help Christians to do what is most correct and pleasing to the Lord.”*  
(*Dies Domini.*, 52)



Many have gone astray, especially in their worthy reception of the sacraments and their lack of attendance and participation at Sunday Mass. Some even think that it is no big deal to consciously skip Mass on Sundays or on Holy Days, even when the Church is clear that those who “*deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin*” (*Catechism*, 2181). We cannot stand by quietly and allow our loved ones to persist in their sin. The Lord calls each of us to be his witnesses (Acts of the Apostles 1:8). The Lord calls each of us to witness to our friends and the members of our families the importance of Sunday and this is fundamentally exemplified by our keeping the Lord’s Day holy and sacred.

I think one of the challenges that we face is that we have forgotten why we are going to Mass on Sunday in the first place. A few years ago, just after I had finished celebrating the Holy Mass, I was asked by a member of the congregation, “Father, I noticed that when you say the Mass, you really don’t seem to be looking at us a whole lot, why is that?” My initial reaction and response was “well, when I celebrate the Mass, I am speaking to our Lord and not the congregation.” In response to this very good question, I attempted to directly clarify this common misconception that the Mass is a dialogue between the priest and the congregation.

With the exception of just a few dialogical parts, i.e., *“the Lord be with you..., lift up your hearts...”* the Mass is not a dialogue between the priest and the congregation as if it were simply a performance reenacting the Last Supper. The Mass is a dialogue between us and Almighty God, a dialogue in which the priest is leading, but one in which everyone is participating.

Maybe we have never thought of it in these terms. Maybe we were formed in a way of thinking that leads us to believe that Mass is essentially about “us,” about what “we” get out of it, about how it makes “me” feel. But if we listen closely to the prayers that are said during the Mass it becomes abundantly clear that we are speaking to God the Father. He is the object of our worship, He is the reason we are there, to worship Him!

In a conference given a few years ago to celebrate the “Year of the Priesthood”, Msgr. Guido Marini, former Pontifical Master of Liturgical Ceremonies, spoke of this very topic explaining that, “theologically speaking, the Holy Mass, as a matter of fact, is always addressed to God through Christ our Lord, and it would be a grievous error to imagine that the principal orientation of the sacrificial action is the community.”

It is crucial that we first understand the very nature of the liturgy and to whom it is being directed. If we are to truly encounter our Lord in “the breaking of the bread” as did the disciples on the road to Emmaus, our hearts and minds must be open to and formed by the liturgical actions and prayers themselves. The Mass is ultimately about the worship and adoration of God, not about any emotional response it may invoke in us.

Msgr. Marini explains on this point that, “the reason why everything in the liturgical act, through the nobility, the beauty, and the harmony of the exterior sign, must be conducive to adoration, to union with God: this includes the music, the singing, the periods of silence, the manner of proclaiming the Word of the Lord, and the manner of praying, the gestures employed, the liturgical vestments and the sacred vessels and other furnishings, as well as the sacred edifice in its entirety.” Everything that is done at Mass, or supposed to be done, is directed to helping us lift up our hearts and minds to God.

As a former high school chaplain, I often heard from the students, “I don’t get anything out of the Mass” or “it is so hard to pay attention or stay focused.” I don’t believe for a minute that this response is limited to teenagers, even though they may express it in a more straightforward manner. The same is true however of any event or activity that we attend. If we are unfamiliar with what is happening or to the real beauty in how it is executed, then certainly, we will not appreciate or be able to enter into it.



For example, I remember the first professional soccer game that I went to in Italy. I knew the basic point of the game was to kick the ball into the opponent's net and I knew that you couldn't use your hands, but that was the extent of my awareness of the game. I didn't understand strategy or the concept of "being offside" or how the individual players functioned together as a team. There was an initial excitement about being in a huge stadium with thousands of screaming Romans, but after that initial excitement faded away, I was quite bored.

I imagine that this feeling is similar to that of those who "get nothing out of the Mass" or find it "boring." When one is unfamiliar with the beauty and the sacredness of such an encounter with God, then that response is almost natural. The question that I continually asked myself as a high school chaplain, trying to foster in the students an appreciation and love for the Mass, was "how do we reclaim the sense of wonder and awe in the mystery of the Mass that the generations of Catholics before us experienced?"

Over and over again, I came to the same conclusion, which is twofold. On the part of the Church, we must first provide an ongoing catechesis for Catholics of all ages and states of life. How can we live out our faith and celebrate it liturgically if we are unaware of what we truly believe as Catholics? The second thing that is necessary is to provide reverent and solemn celebrations of the Mass allowing its natural beauty to lead us into contact with the divine presence of God. There is nothing I or any other priest can do to make the Mass more beautiful or engaging or interesting than it already is on its own merits - at each Mass, Jesus Christ becomes truly present – there is nothing more awesome than that!

Each of us, however, also has the responsibility to grow in our faith and not just go about things as passive members of the Church. If we are to "get more" out of the Mass, we ought to first strive to understand the Mass by reflecting upon how we approach Mass in the first place. We need to ask the question, "is this about worshiping and praising God?" or "is it about me and how it makes me feel?" Practically speaking, how can we be better about this?



*"Know, O Christian, that the Mass is the holiest act of religion. You cannot do anything to glorify God more, nor profit your soul more, than by devoutly assisting at it, and assisting as often as possible."*

- St. Peter Julian Eymard

A priest friend of mine from another diocese was lamenting to me once about how frustrating it is for him when he is celebrating the holy Mass and people are coming in late or leaving early. His main concern was not so much his being distracted while trying to lead the congregation in worship but that it communicates to him that people are not taking the Mass all that seriously. Illustrating his frustration he asked, “Would they show up to the doctor’s office late?” “Would they leave a movie early?” Valid point, no?

Now this may seem like an obvious question, but when does the Mass begin? When does it end? One could take a rather simple look at the Mass and come to the conclusion that the Mass begins when the opening hymn is sung or with the Sign of the Cross. And just as clearly, it appears to be over when the priest or deacon says, “The Mass is ended, go in peace” or when the closing hymn is finished. In a strict sense, this is true, but in another sense, there is much more to the Mass, especially if we are trying to do more than just fulfill an obligation.

Is it a matter of embracing all that our Lord wants to give us at each celebration of the Mass or is it merely settling for “skimming the surface” and going through the routine motions of the ritual?

*“If we really understood the Mass,  
we would die of joy.”*  
- John Vianney

When we gather in our parish Churches each Sunday, we all come with many things on our hearts and minds. We have many legitimate concerns and anxieties that are constantly running through our minds, especially when we are seated silently in Church. Often times these “other things” can distract us from “praying” the Mass.

Certainly, our Lord does not want us to separate out the things of our lives from Him; on the contrary, He wants us to invite Him into those areas of our lives that need Him most – our worries and anxieties, our joys and our hopes. But at Mass, He wants us to give Him our full attention. He wants us to be fed by His saving Word that we hear in Sacred Scripture and to be fed by our worthy reception of the Eucharist.

How do we do both? How do we bring all of the things of our individual lives before our Lord and place them at the foot of His Cross and at the same time enter into the Mass and worship God freed from all anxieties?

It all goes back to my original point of when the Mass starts and ends. If we are to properly and worthily enter into the sacred mysteries of our faith, we need to provide some time of preparation and reflection. How do we expect to do this if we are rushing into Mass thirty seconds before it starts, or even worse, after it has already started?

We need time to spiritually prepare ourselves for what we are about to do, sort of like stretching before we exercise. We do this by first reminding ourselves that we are in the presence of God. It is then important for us to clear our mind of those things that serve only to distract us and ask our Lord for the grace to remain focused and attentive throughout the Mass, so that we may be spiritually nourished, and thus face life’s challenges with courage and trust in God. Many folks find it helpful to read through the Readings before Mass as a way to help them prepare before Mass, but also so that they can listen more attentively when God’s Word is proclaimed during the Mass.

The same is equally true at the end of Mass. Throughout the history of the Church, up until a more recent time, it was widely understood and practiced that after the priest processed out, everyone would kneel down and say a “Prayer of Thanksgiving,” thanking God for the great gift that we have just received in the Eucharist in a parallel manner to the way in which one would come into Church before Mass and kneel down and pray in preparation for Mass.

It is similar to being invited to someone’s house for dinner and showing up late or leaving without saying thank you. At each celebration of the Mass our Lord allows us to be sacramentally brought back to the first celebration of the Mass on Holy Thursday and to the foot of the Cross on Calvary. At each Mass, He gives us the greatest gift, His own body and blood, the bread come down from heaven. Spending a few minutes after Mass in a quiet act of thanksgiving is not only a polite action, it is also the proper response to what we have just received – God Himself!



*“Recognize in this bread what hung on the cross, and in this chalice what flowed from His side... whatever was in many and varied ways announced beforehand in the sacrifices of the Old Testament pertains to this one sacrifice which is revealed in the New Testament.”*

- St. Augustine

It can be a bit discouraging and sometimes even distracting, when someone comes in late to Mass or leaves before it has ended either right after receiving Holy Communion or before the priest has processed out. There are certainly occasions when Mass may go a bit longer than normal and one needs to exit more quickly than normal, but these should be the rare exceptions and not the norm.

To “get the most out of the Mass” we need to look at how much we are putting into the Mass. Arriving early to spiritually prepare our hearts and minds, to read over the readings before Mass or recite other devotional prayers as well as prayers of thanksgiving afterward are essential parts of the Eucharistic celebration. Preparing ourselves before Mass and reflecting silently afterward are indispensable elements of growing in our relationship with the Lord and our appreciation and participation at the Holy Mass.

The Saints have given us profound insights for us to ponder, especially as we begin this effort to bring about a Eucharistic Renewal, I invite you to prayerfully reflect upon these powerful words.

*"When you have received Him, stir up your heart to do Him homage; speak to Him about your spiritual life, gazing upon Him in your soul where He is present for your happiness; welcome Him as warmly as possible, and behave outwardly in such a way that your actions may give proof to all of His Presence."*

- St. Francis de Sales

*"What wonderful majesty! What stupendous condescension! O sublime humility! That the Lord of the whole universe, God and the Son of God, should humble Himself like this under the form of a little bread, for our salvation" "...In this world I cannot see the Most High Son of God with my own eyes, except for His Most Holy Body and Blood."*

- St. Francis of Assisi



*In order to examine in depth the mystery of the Eucharist, we must continually return to the Upper Room where in the evening of Holy Thursday the Last Supper took place. In today's liturgy St. Paul speaks precisely of the institution of the Eucharist. This text seems to be the most ancient one concerning the Eucharist, preceding the account itself given by the Evangelists. In his Letter to the Corinthians Paul writes: "The Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, and when He had given thanks, he broke it, and said "This is My Body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My Blood. Do this, as often as you drink of it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes."*

(1 Cor 11:23-26)

- Saint John Paul II

As we begin this Eucharistic Renewal, I want to take this opportunity to invite each member of our parishes to make the Lord's Day the center of their lives and their families. Together, we can restore the sacredness of Sundays, make our parishes stronger and strengthen our families around the Altar of the Lord. This is not an endeavor that I can undertake on my own. I am inviting and challenging each parishioner and each family to make the simple commitment of never missing Sunday Mass. Let it be something that we would never even consider. Our Lord has given us so much, He asks for only one hour of our week. Let us give Him proper worship and honor and thanks each Sunday, for Sunday is the Lord's Day, let us rejoice and be glad in it!

- Father Jay Mello, Solemnity of Corpus Christi, 2022